Carly Simon's new idea: A 4-minute musical movie

By Michael F. Bamberger
Special to The Globe

OAK BLUFFS – Friday night in Oak Bluffs, Dave Johnson and some high school buddies settled into their seats at the Island Theater, popcorn in hand, ready to see "Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom." So did 500 other people.

The lights went dim, and the film rolled. But it was not Indiana Jones. It was not previews of coming attractions, pleas for the Jimmy Fund, or requests not to smoke.

It was Carly Simon on the big screen, alternately being embraced and rejected by a lover, as she sang "It Happens Every Day," a lyrical ballad from her latest album.

The 4-minute film is the first musical short made for movie theaters. And for Johnson, 19, a summer resident on Martha's Vineyard, the short was "interesting and different" and a "good introduction to a song I hadn't heard before." For Simon, who has been on the Vineyard each of her 40 summers, the short represents a novel way to keep herself before the public's eyes and ears.

Simon, who has not performed a solo concert in four years, says the movie theater short is "exciting for me because it's a new idea" and an "ideal way to keep performing."

Friday night was the first Vineyard showing of the short which has been playing for two weeks in a chain of movie houses in Alabama. During the night, Simon was at the island theater, and, later at the Hot Tin Roof, a Vineyard nightclub that she co-owns with Herbert Putnam, to promote the film and celebrate its New England inaugural.

The drink of the evening at the Roof was the Carly, a combination of Cointreau and cranberry juice, a splash of soda and a squeeze of lime that sold for $1.25. Peter Simon, Carly's brother, was the evening's deejay and he began the night, not surprisingly, with his sister's songs.

Another segment shows Paul Garcia, Richard's twin brother, looking in a mirror, observing Simon; the two brothers play roles in a bittersweet and dissolving romance with Simon. She serves at the narrator by singing "It Happens Every Day" – the reference is to relationships ending – throughout the short.

The Garcias co-own the Munson Diner in Manhattan, where the film was shot three months ago. They joined Simon at the Island Theater, and at the Roof Friday night. A steamy poster advertising the film, tacked to several island billboards, shows Richard Garcia, in an embrace with Simon.

The short is being distributed by Music Motions, a new company which also produced the film. It will premiere in an Acton theater and a Manhattan movie house later this week. Thomas Hayes, the short's producer, is trying to sell chains and individual theaters on the idea. Hayes approached Simon with the movie preview musical short concept. Simon had already begun the film as a television video.

Hayes' hope is that the idea will catch; that theater owners will find the musical short attracts moviegoers, that artists will find the shorts a positive way to promote themselves. The new idea's success, it would appear, is dependent upon audience reaction.

"It's more interesting than just listening to music," said Jim Virtu, 20, the Island Theater's doorman, who saw the short four times Friday night. Before the color, Dolby sound, Simon film, the theater played old Elton John tunes over the audio system.

Kelly Seiler, 22, said she is a fan of Simon's and that hearing "It Happens Every Day" will probably result in her buying the album on which it appears, "Hello Big Men".

The album, which features "You Know What to Do," was released six months ago by Warner Brothers. Simon left the Los Angeles company four months ago, saying she would rather work with a company in New York, where she lives. Simon hopes the short will generate interest in "It Happens Every Day", and that Warner Brothers will release it as a single.

"Stranger things have happened in the music business," she said.

Simon is now working, with former Saturday Night Live writer Thomas Schiller, on a musical comedy film for RCA-Selectravision. The film will be released with a soundtrack, probably in the fall.

The idea of blending music with visual images "has expanded me, added a new dimension to what I do," Simon said. She now thinks more in terms of plot and visual image when she writes, she said, than in the days before the music video.

Simon says she feels "very at ease in front of a camera." She has no plans to perform in concert, saying "I don't feel comfortable before large live audiences. But I've learned never to say never," she said.

In the meantime she plans to watch feature films, and what comes before them, with great care.